NEWS

Winchester fire union says more staffing needed on shifts

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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The Winchester fire union is asking town officials to look at the possibility of increasing its staffing by one more person per shift. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

A fire on White Street in mid-August is the latest example of why Winchester fire union officials are asking for more personnel per

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The fire, which broke out around 1 a.m. on a back porch, quickly escalated to the point where the roof collapsed and a second alarm was called.

No one was injured in the blaze, but mutual aid from surrounding cities and towns was quickly called.

Because both Medic 1, the ambulance, and Engine 1 were out of service on other emergencies when the fire started, that left only five Winchester firefighters on shift to handle the situation. Hence, the second alarm and mutual aid.

And while you might think this is a one-off situation, Winchester Firefighter's Union IAFF Local #1564 President Nick Adragna said it happens more often than is comfortable.

Earlier this summer, a medical call once again pulled M1 and E1 out of service, leaving the entire town to be covered by the five firefighters on shift at the time.

Adragna said Winchester is staffed with nine firefighters per 24-hour shift, not including administrative personnel such as the fire chief, fire prevention officer or any deputies. And excluding the chief and deputy chief, there are five captains, eight lieutenants and 31 firefighters total.

Adragna said the lack of staffing issue has really come to the forefront since the July 13 Fall River fire at the Gabriel House assisted living facility, where 10 people died and more than 30 others were injured, including six firefighters.

Adragna said immediately after the incident, he received no less than 15 phone calls asking about local staffing.

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"I would say people are concerned...not worried, but concerned and more aware," he said. "The union is not looking to get that many more people on board. We're looking to increase the staffing for safety reasons."

How did this all happen? In July 1989, the economy forced the town to layoff safety personnel, including firefighters. That took the 11 firefighters on shift down to nine, which hasn't changed since.

"We understand there were budgetary constraints at the time," Adragna said. "But we've been through many contract negotiations since then."

In fact, the union is currently in the midst of negotiating a new contract with the town after its last contract expired July 1. Adragna said the union is asking the town to consider adding one more firefighter per shift.

"All we're looking for is a seat at the table," he said. "We want to increase the number by one. It takes bodies to carry hose and fire tools."

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And often the current staffing is short even without an emergency. Adragna said people take vacations, are sick or out on leave, and that all leaves the department short of personnel.

So how does Winchester make do? Mostly with overtime, a strategy Adragna and others agree is not the best way to solve the staffing shortages.

"The union is sympathetic to the issues the town is having," Adragna said, of a $3 million shortfall possibly on its way. "But we're just looking to increase one more position."

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Adragna added the fire union has a good relationship with Chief Steven Osborne, but it's been frustrating to deal with the town on this one issue.

"I would say confidence is extremely low," he said. "It's disheartening."

Outside of the staffing issues — which Adragna added many communities in Massachusetts and throughout the country are dealing with — he said the Fire Department is overall satisfied.

"Outside of the staffing, the town has been very good to us," Adragna said. "We are very lucky to be employed by a great town like Winchester. But again, people are concerned about the staffing and getting more people on board."

In the meantime, Adragna said the department is lucky to be part of a larger metro mutual aid network.

"Mutual aid is fantastic," he said. "It is terrific the way everyone responds to cover each other's communities."

But it's not enough. Adragna said the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), Professional Fire Fighters of Massachusetts (PFFM) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) have all been working on the issue of firefighter safety.

"The NFPA has been trying to put national standards in place and has remedied some situations, based off of studies they've conducted," Adragna said, of the work being done.

A former vice president and president of the state PFFM, Adragna said he's attended meetings for the past five years and is aware first hand of the group's efforts to help firefighters across the state.

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And, he added, the IAFF jumped into the staffing issues in Massachusetts following the Fall River fire and found that only three fire departments in the state are actually properly staffed: Boston, Brookline and New Bedford.

In the meantime, firefighters statewide are being reminded about following proper procedure and protocol when it comes to being on the job.

Adragna said he wants Winchester residents to know the union isn't concerned about new trucks or equipment, just a few more people on staff to make sure they are as safe as the community they protect.

"I would say the biggest takeaway I want people to understand is that Winchester is home to 44 dedicated firefighters who respond to every emergency," he said. "Reaction is never as good as being proactive and we just want to have an honest conversation about increasing the staffing here in Winchester."

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